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Parents with good literacy, parenting, and job skills can help boost their children's academic achievement, as well as improve their own lives. Unfortunately, many families living in poverty lack literacy skills, as defined by American mainstream culture. While most "have developed complex problem solving skills that enable them to survive" in very difficult circumstances, their deficiency in traditional skills exacerbates the problems they face (Taylor, 1993, p. 551).

Family literacy programs around the country have been successful in breaking the cycle of intergenerational literacy deficiency, however. Early findings of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL, 1994) suggest that the programs are more effective than typical adult education programs with adult family members, and more effective than child-focused programs with disadvantaged children. Moreover, parents' success in a literacy program gives them new access to mainstream American culture and promotes a richer relationship with their children and involvement in the children's school (Come & Fredericks, 1995; Gadsden, 1996; NCFL, 1994).

Much information is available about program components effective in teaching literacy skills. Less attention has been paid to the value of building on families' existing skills, diverse cultures and languages, and life experiences, although doing so has been shown to increase program efficacy. This digest, therefore, focuses on strategies for reaching families that reflect the strengths they already have.

GENERAL PROGRAM PRINCIPLES

The Federal Even Start Family Literacy Program, authorized in 1988, is the catalyst for much of the family literacy activity nationally. It provides funds for local partnership programs to deliver literacy services to low-income families with at least one adult eligible for Adult Basic Education. Program participants are ethnically diverse, frequently urban and limited in English proficiency, and, increasingly, teenage parents and the very poor. In 1996-97 Even Start supported 637 projects serving 34,400 parents and their children (Tao, Gamse, & Tarr, 1998).
Funded programs must adhere to Even Start's core organizational, curricular, and evaluation requirements and goals. They must provide parents with instruction in a variety of literacy skills and assist them in promoting their children's educational development; they also must provide the children with an early childhood education. Many programs, in addition, specifically help adults get a GED and develop marketable job skills, and most work with community agencies to provide a full range of social services.

Despite Even Start's mandates, program models vary widely. Some are designed for replication nationally, use a fully refined and evaluated curriculum, and receive additional major support from private foundations. There are, for example, hundreds of NCFL sites. Others are single centers that are developed, managed, and supported by a collaboration of local educational institutions and groups, in direct response to

community needs (Come & Fredericks, 1995; Griswold & Ullman, 1997; NCFL, 1994).

CUSTOMIZATION FOR DIVERSE FAMILIES

The degree to which programs reflect and involve the families they serve varies, although multi-site programs tend to be more generic in organization and curriculum. Another difference among programs is the extent of their acceptance of a "deficit" model for disadvantaged parents, which considers poverty and literacy deficiencies a personal, rather than a social, problem. This philosophy results in a curriculum that directs parents in the program's understanding of the correct way to learn and raise children, instead of appreciating and using parents' innate and experienced-based knowledge as a building block for additional skills development (Taylor, 1993).

An approach to literacy development that conforms to Even Start's education principles, but also validates the participants' capabilities, increases a program's potential for success. When staffed by individuals who respect diversity and different kinds of knowledge, a program can address issues of race, class, and gender, and can help parents overcome feelings of powerlessness that may diminish their belief that personal literacy development will improve their family's lives (Gadsden, 1996; Strickland, 1996).

FAMILY RECRUITMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

Recruitment strategies that reflect cultural diversity and local norms, stress personal contact, and use former program participants are most effective. Distribution of informational materials and publicity in local businesses and centers increases awareness of the program. Active support from community and religious leaders is an important recommendation for wary families (Dwyer, 1995). Special outreach efforts can attract fathers who may think they are too busy to participate or may be ashamed about their lack of skills.

Because parents have different reasons for wanting the services of a family literacy program, and may not even be aware that their needs can be met through literacy development, a varied curriculum increases a program's attractiveness. Parents may want specific instruction in how to help their children learn, or strategies for disciplining them. They may want to learn English, increase their own skills to get a better job, function more competently in society, or simply be more personally fulfilled. Parents who feel like successful learners, no matter what the curriculum, can convey the sense of accomplishment to their children (Griswold & Ullman, 1997; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995).

Considering themselves partners in the learning process both engages and empowers parents (Strickland, 1996). Curriculum developers can involve parents by asking them about the circumstances in which they would use English or other literacy skills (Wrigley, 1994). For example, staff at Project FLAME, in Chicago, IL, helped limited English proficient parents add an academic component to a crafts course they wanted

to design. Staff also compromised on its own ideas about language learning to incorporate into English classes use of grammar books and workbooks because learners believed those resources "are synonymous with good teaching" (Shanahan et al., 1995, p. 589). Involving parents in setting standards ensures the standards will be supported (Wrigley, 1994).

CURRICULUM

Certain curriculum components have been shown to increase family literacy program effectiveness with diverse learners. Curriculum can facilitate learning by helping participants, through interactions with the staff and each other, do the following (Butkus & Willoughby, 1995; Gadsden, 1996; Griswold, & Ullman, 1997; Shanahan et al., 1995): *Understand and develop a range of child- and literacy-development perspectives; get mutual support and help; develop respect for cultural differences; and build self-help, communication, and interpersonal skills.

*Use their own knowledge and beliefs as a foundation for additional learning.

*Identify and meet personal goals, and become an advocate for themselves and their children.

*Build communities and networks for support and political and social action.

By encouraging talking, reading (of multicultural materials), and writing, programs can create opportunities for behavior that develop traditional literacy skills, while showing participants that their native way of communicating with their children (such as oral story-telling) is also a valid type of literacy activity (Heath, 1982).

The Family Literacy Involvement Through Education (FLITE) program in the Bronx, NY, for example, uses health, stress, discipline, and cooking as curriculum topics to provide parents with useful information while also increasing their literacy skills. Parents who had never used written recipes learn to understand cookbook formats, try new recipes, and document their own. As part of its preschool program, FLITE staff members conduct home visits. In class, to support children's language development, English- and Spanish-speaking teachers work with the children and their parents, who may be learning English as a Second Language in the adult program, in a dual-language classroom (Griswold & Ullman, 1997).

Several California programs work with refugees who have little experience with formal schooling or even a written language. Participants are given tours of cultural sites as a way of introducing them to different kinds of literacy and helping them understand that they already are literate in certain ways. Refugees are also encouraged to share their experiences, many of which are painful, as a way of both documenting them and helping the story-teller process them. Promoting the creativity of all parents through

poetry writing, production of newsletters, and playwriting and production (in English and participants' native languages) not only develops a range of skills but also helps transmit culture across generations (Wrigley, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Developing the skills of parents to enable them to be more personally successful and fulfilled, and to more effectively promote their children's learning at home and achievement in school, is the goal of all family literacy programs. Programs which consciously draw on the existing abilities of families in program design and curriculum, and which use social and cultural issues as a context for learning, have an additional goal: they want to build the participants' self-esteem through an appreciation of their own knowledge and instincts, help them understand that they are not to blame for their circumstances, and "empower [them] to direct their own learning and use it for their own purposes" (Auerbach, 1995, cited in Griswold & Ullman, 1997, p. 25)

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